

# INTEGRATING WOMEN INTO THE INFANTRY

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**W**OMEN HAVE NOT been given a chance to succeed on an equal footing with men in the military. Even after decades of reform, initiated by the All-Volunteer Force (AVF) in 1973, women are excluded from six principal job groups: infantry, armor, short-range air defense, cannon artillery, combat engineers, and special forces. Opponents of total gender integration point out that women cannot perform the physically demanding work these job groups require. Opponents also say that putting women into units where only men have traditionally served will jeopardize the Army's combat readiness by ruining unit cohesion.

This article proposes that the U.S. Army integrate women into the infantry branch. It will dispel practical notions that a woman is too "weak" to do an infantryman's job and that her presence will destroy team spirit and ground maneuver units' fighting effectiveness. This article does not dispute those who believe it is wrong for the United States to send women to fight close combat battles, nor is it an advocate for those who wish to destroy gender barriers simply because they exist. It acknowledges the personal nature of those points of view and avoids them altogether. Instead, this article assumes a sociopolitical climate in which only practical debate is waged about whether to integrate women into the infantry. The issue, then, is not about right and wrong but about suitability and feasibility. Can women do the infantryman's job, and how can the Army help them do it? The key assumption, here, is that American women would volunteer to become infantry soldiers if given the chance.

## Why Women in the Infantry?

Ground combat units contain the only jobs closed to women in land-based military forces today. Before the AVF, which recruited women to replace some of the Army's postdraft manpower losses, women made up 3 percent of all soldiers in the Army. Today, women account for 14 percent of all

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soldiers and 20 percent of all recruits.<sup>1</sup> They fly attack helicopters, command military police companies, drive infantry soldiers into combat on trucks, and "man" logistics bases far forward, or in the midst, of ground maneuver forces. In the past 15 years, women have been killed in combat. At the end of Operation Desert Storm in 1991, there were 13 women killed in action. Of those, four were termed "hostile deaths" out of a total of 148 U.S. combat deaths.<sup>2</sup> Interestingly, two of those deaths occurred when an Iraqi Scud missile hit a temporary barracks housing combat service support units far behind the forward edge of the battle area.<sup>3</sup>

These deaths seem to back the notion that today's battlefield is no longer as well-defined as it once was. For example, U.S. offensive doctrine calls for attacking the enemy's lines of communication, in addition to his main defenses, to disrupt their combat forces' resupply.<sup>4</sup> The theory is that, if successful, the enemy's maneuver forces will run out of rations, ammunition, and the will to fight, in that order. It is no secret that the United States' conventional threat uses the same doctrine. Our field trains, brigade support areas, and division support areas are the key objectives of conventional enemy attacks. It is also no secret that most Army women work in these areas.

This doctrine transforms all soldiers—men and women—in field command and control and/or logistics areas into front-line combatants, at least in the enemy's eyes. Why attack through infantry and

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*The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Department of the Army, the Department of Defense, or any other government office or agency.—Editor*

armor when the division rear can be penetrated? Of course, this says nothing about why women belong in the infantry.

Proponents of giving women the right to serve in ground combat units usually use a combination of arguments: an equal opportunity to serve is every

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American's right; current technologies are gender-neutral; and other nations allow women in the infantry.<sup>5</sup> This list omits perhaps the most compelling reason to integrate women into the infantry and other ground combat fields: given the contemporary operating environment, women are in close proximity to combat regardless of where they are on the battlefield, so they might as well be allowed to fight offensively.

At this point, opponents of gender integration point out why women do not belong in the infantry:

- Women lack the upper body strength to perform an infantryman's job.
- Women have certain hygiene needs that would demand special treatment in the field.
- Women are too valuable as reproducers of human life to be wasted in ground combat.
- Women are nondeployable while pregnant.
- Women would destroy the cohesion of previously all-male ground combat units.<sup>6</sup>

The oldest argument against allowing women in the infantry is that women are too weak. The genesis of this argument is as old as society and civilization—women are the weaker sex; a woman's duty is to bear and raise children; men are supposed to protect women. Whether these assumptions are myth or reality, they have governed social thought for centuries. Women did not serve in the military, and women did not play sports. Women who chose to work were restricted to teaching, clerking, and nursing. Even when women were allowed in the military during World War II, they did not receive the same military training as the men. Instead, women received pointers on how to maintain trim figures and an attractive appearance.

Women were partly responsible for this. In World War II, the Navy's Women Accepted for Voluntary Emergency Service (WAVES) initially attracted more women than the Army's Women's Army Corps (WAC). The WAVES' navy blue uniform was considered more stylish than the olive drab the WACs wore.<sup>7</sup>

The women's movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s changed all of that. American women demanded equal treatment and equal opportunity in all aspects of society and very nearly got that. In 1972, Congress enacted a law known as Title IX that made it illegal for any school that received Federal funds to spend more money on men's athletics than it did on women's athletics. More than anything before or since, Title IX made it acceptable and attractive for women to pursue athletic dreams and hone their athletic prowess at the high school and collegiate levels.<sup>8</sup> In the 25-plus years since Title IX was introduced, women's athletics in America have grown exponentially. Today, women in high school and college compete in many of the same sports in which men compete, and women now play professional soccer and basketball in national, televised leagues.

Title IX's key contribution was giving women the government's stamp of approval to be athletic without risking losing their "womanness." Meanwhile, women gained much athletic ground on men. Consider the world record progression in the marathon. In the past 30 years, the men's record has gone from 2 hours, 9 minutes (2:09) to 2:05, a 3-percent improvement. Over the same period, the women's record has improved from 3:01 to 2:18, an almost 24-percent improvement. The women's record went from being 71 percent of the men's record to 90 percent.<sup>9</sup>

Note also the pole vault event, which was closed to women because track and field authorities considered women either to be too weak or the event too dangerous, or both. Since the International Association of Athletics Federations opened the event to women in 1992, the women's record has gone from an initial 4.05 meters (m) to 4.81 m, a 16-percent improvement. In the same period, the men's record improved only .04 percent, from 6.12 m to 6.14 m.<sup>10</sup>

This is not to say that women will continue to improve at the pace of the past 30 years and bypass men's athletic accomplishments. What this shows is a true picture of women's athletic potential. Simply put, before Title IX, women were not encouraged to play and, on the whole, played at a misleadingly low level compared to men. Since Title IX, women have been able to realize their physiological potential in athletics.



Army nurses prepare to disembark from a troop transport at Liverpool's Princess Dock in 1944.

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Sports scientists generally agree that a woman can run 90 percent as fast as a man over all distances and is about two-thirds as strong in the upper body. However, upper body strength assessments might soon prove to be inaccurate. Women's weightlifting world records hover at around 70 percent of the men's record in most comparable weight classes. In some classes, the women's record is as high as 78 percent.<sup>11</sup> Bear in mind that weightlifting, like pole vaulting, was introduced to the Olympic Games as a medal sport for women only during 2000.

Scientists point out that a woman's athletic potential is limited by specific physiology. American women are, on average, 4 inches shorter than the average man and 40 pounds lighter. Women also have from 6.5 to 13 pounds more body fat than men and from 40 to 48 pounds less lean body mass, or muscle weight. Women also possess about one-tenth of the amount of testosterone as men, a hormone that is key to strength development. Because of this, scientists say that even the strongest, fastest woman can never expect to surpass the strongest, fastest man.<sup>12</sup>

However, even if physiology allows a woman to be two-thirds as strong as an average man, most women are actually much less strong than that. Sports physiologists believe this condition is culturally induced. In our society, strength is viewed as a masculine trait, and small, frail bodies are considered to be feminine. Sex stereotypes such as these do much to program behavior and prevent individuals from fulfilling their full potential.<sup>13</sup> In the past, this has meant discouraging women from engaging in

weight training and the more strenuous sports (football, basketball, soccer) that men have traditionally played. While there has been progress since Title IX, change is slow.

Change is even slower in the Army. The AVF and Title IX occurred at around the same time. Both acknowledged a need for greater and more varied roles for women in society and in the Armed Forces. While Title IX spawned a generation of professional women athletes, the AVF seemed content to protect the status quo. Consider the Army Physical Fitness Test (APFT). The current APFT, introduced in 1999, is only a revision of the 1984 paradigm that introduced 2 minutes each of pushups and situps and the timed 2-mile run.

The Army developed the 1984 standards by testing a large group of soldiers without familiarizing or training them on the new events and then recording the scores. The Army APFT minimum standard became the number of pushups and situps and 2-mile run time recorded by soldiers at the bottom of the 90 percent that passed. In sum, the Army's landmark 1984 APFT makeover, intended to bring soldiers to a higher level of health and physical readiness, was based on the achievements of the 11th percentile.<sup>14</sup>

Men's standards were actually high enough to be both challenging and realistic. The youngest men, 18 to 21 years old, had to perform a minimum of 42 pushups and 52 situps, and run 2 miles in 15:54 to pass the APFT. However, women's standards were much lower. The youngest women had to do 18

pushups and 50 situps and run 2 miles in 18:54.<sup>15</sup>

Comparatively, women did 43 percent of the upper body work the men did, performed roughly the same amount of abdominal work, and ran 84 percent of the men's minimum. These scores do not

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correspond with a woman's physiological potential. Assuming that most soldiers train to meet rather than exceed APFT standards, Army women since 1984 have done only about 64 percent of the upper body work of which they are capable and about 90 percent of their ability on the 2-mile run.

By the mid-1990s, the Army, realizing its standards were too low in some places and too high in others, rewrote the APFT's minimum standards. As of 1999, women and men were required to do the same number of situps across all age groups. The Army also increased the minimum number of pushups for the youngest women—by one. The 2-mile run time minimums remained the same. In determining the new standards, the Army used the 1984 testing strategy, eliminating the bottom 10 percent as failures and adopting the next lowest score as the minimum standard. Participants were not put through a special physical training program to raise standards. Soldiers had performed against the 1984 standards throughout their periods of service and performed predictably.<sup>16</sup>

Given this study, one could say the Army has no one to blame but itself for any shortcomings in the perceived or tested physical abilities of female soldiers. In short, the Army has not given women a chance to succeed physically on a par with men.

Physique, which is only one argument against introducing women into the infantry, is also the one the critics are most ready to concede in light of the great strides women have made in athletics in the past 30 years. Other issues—nondeployability, special hygiene and privacy needs, and their status as procreators—also deserve attention.

Opponents of women in the infantry cite nondeployability because of pregnancy as a reason not to have female grunts, but consider the Gulf war. Overall deployability rates throughout the Gulf war were 91 percent for women and 98 percent for

men. Reportedly, half of all soldiers who did not deploy had medical problems. Because of the 7-percent disparity, the consensus among men—without proof—was that many women were getting pregnant so they would not have to deploy. It is likely that some women did just that. Even so, the pregnancy rate for women in the military during the Gulf war remained the same as the peacetime rate. It has even been suggested that, as a temporary disability, men missed more work time due to sports injuries than women missed while pregnant.<sup>17</sup>

Privacy and hygiene needs are the next issue. In short, men and women require separate latrines, showers, and living quarters, especially in the field. This was also tested during the Gulf war. The Army discovered that by using common sense and having respect for each others' needs, men and women soldiers could share limited field latrines and showers without incident. Billeting is a concern only when it is limited to tents or actual field conditions. Commanders in the Gulf tried several different strategies: separate tents when available; women's sections of tents separated by hanging towels or blankets and integrated tents where privacy was minimal.

In the end, women found they preferred sharing tents with those they worked with and handling any privacy issues in the same common-sense manner as was used with latrines and showers. Rumors of sexual liaisons in tent cities were common during the Gulf war, but two reasons probably kept such behavior to a minimum: the lack of privacy and familiarity within any unit. In the words of one woman assigned to a unit deployed to the Gulf, "We know their wives and girlfriends so we don't expect trouble."<sup>18</sup>

The third issue is women's place as procreators and nurturers. Opponents say women are too valuable to society to risk in direct combat because they bear children. But this issue pulls at emotions rather than at intellect. In the early 1990s, Air Force Chief of Staff General Merrill A. McPeak spoke for many when he said, "I just can't get over this feeling of old men ordering young women into combat. . . . I have a gut-based hangup there. And it doesn't make a lot of sense in every way. I apologize for it."<sup>19</sup> In its original manifestation, the Equal Rights Amendment narrowly missed being approved, perhaps because of this one issue.<sup>20</sup> But the issue is very much alive.

The actual percentage of women in direct combat would probably be quite low. No one can imagine the total number of women in ground combat units surpassing 25 percent of all personnel anytime in the distant future after any type of integration. With 10 divisions in the Active Army totaling 500,000, 25 percent equates to 20,000 women in di-



Male and female members of the 1st Armored Division headquarters staff wait patiently for their turn to shower, 22 February 1991.

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rect combat roles. Twenty thousand women represents about .03 percent of the approximately 60 million American women who are currently in their reproductive prime.<sup>21</sup> Of course, a world war would more than likely pull more women into ground combat units, but in that case, global and human survival would be at stake. In comparison to peacetime, the number of women who would voluntarily serve in ground combat units is low. For example, Canada, a nation with an armed force of about 65,000, currently has six women infantry soldiers.

On the flip side of this issue, women are the most valuable human military asset because some of the gravest threats today come not from conventional armies but from asymmetric forces such as global terrorists. This type of threat uses surprise to achieve its goals. The current threat also operates from Third-World, religiously fundamental countries or societies where women's rights do not exist. Such male-dominated, paternalistic, and sexist threat groups probably do not expect to meet resistance from women, especially those who are not dressed in traditional military garb. Well-trained women could become America's greatest source of asymmetric combat power.

The last issue that opponents of gender integration bring up is cohesion. They wonder if allowing women into ground combat roles improves or undermines combat readiness. The hard truth is that right now, integrating women into the infantry and other currently all-men combat arms units would more than likely hurt morale initially. Infantrymen and

leaders would fumble their way to finding out just how to deal with women. The news media would pay close attention and generate excessive publicity, both positive and negative. It would be a bumpy ride for a while, but more than likely, the Army and the infantry would adjust. The U.S. Army would be better for it, not worse.

The obvious comparison to total gender integration is the Armed Forces' racial integration that President Harry S. Truman ordered in 1948. Based on unit cohesion alone this was a risky move that most whites and many blacks opposed. Whites argued that black soldiers were unreliable and careless, and blacks maintained they would not get fair treatment in racially integrated units. After integration, blacks and whites agreed that black soldiers performed better in racially mixed units because competition with white soldiers improved not only their soldier skills but their self-confidence as well.

Researchers at the time also found that desegregation did not hurt combat effectiveness. Residual racism still existed, but it was offset by the realization that blacks could be as competent at soldiering as whites and that formal integration was improving black soldiers' skills. Interestingly, black soldiers' complaints of racism or unfair treatment actually decreased in integrated units.<sup>22</sup>

Following this example, gender integration could be as simple and successful as racial integration. But women are not separated from men by skin color alone. In gender integration, women actually have less in common with men than white and black



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men did with each other in 1948. White and black men were already infantry soldiers. Women, if they are to be accepted by men in previously all-male fields, must not only prove themselves equal to men, they must also demolish generations-old perceptions of being the protected rather than the protector. This is the recipe for cohesion.

Social scientists today prefer to divide cohesion, or the feelings that bind individuals to the immediate group, into two types: task and social.<sup>23</sup> Opponents argue that introducing women into ground combat units would immediately erode those units' social cohesion, which they argue is more important than task cohesion. Opponents also say that any well-trained group of men and women can develop task cohesion to accomplish virtually any work problem, regardless of how members feel about each other. They go on to say that while task cohesion may be enough to get the job done in the civilian work force, it is not enough in the military. In the military, the intimacy and isolation of combat demand high social cohesion.<sup>24</sup> This leaves only one question: Can women bond socially with men?

According to a 1997 RAND study that the Department of Defense sponsored, "Gender differences alone did not appear to erode cohesion. Cohesion was reported high in units where people believed the command emphasized unity and the importance and necessity of all members and divisions in accomplishing the mission."<sup>25</sup> Even more important, the study went on to say, "High social cohesion, or bonding on a social level, can have deleterious effects on performance outcomes and task cohesion, because people start to prioritize friendship and social activities over performing their jobs."<sup>26</sup>

The bottom line regarding either social or task cohesion is fair and equal treatment. Women and men can bond to form effective units in any job field or situation as long as the women feel they will be treated equally and the men perceive that the women will not receive special treatment.

There is one additional lesson about gender integration and unit cohesion that our service academies and military colleges have taught us. Once women comprise more than 20 percent of a unit or class, they are judged as individuals and not as representatives of their gender. Successful women cadets in

the group become fellow cadets, not female cadets. Overall unit acceptance soon follows.<sup>27</sup>

On the matter of cohesion, caution goes with promise. The lessons that service academies and NATO allies have learned, particularly in Canada, as they went through gender-integration trials, tells us that it takes roughly a year to break down pre-existing, negative, sexist attitudes. It takes quite a while before mixed-gender units function more efficiently and at higher levels of capability than all-male units. Therefore, says one social scientist, "Until American women are given the opportunity to dispel the prejudicial opinions ensconced within the U.S. military, those opposed to extended integration assist in the perpetuation of these preconceived notions."<sup>28</sup>

### **Integrating Women Into the Infantry**

Contrary to what many believe, only Canada has succeeded at desegregating its infantry. When the topic of military fighting women comes up, many point to Israel as an example of a nation with a gender-integrated ground combat force. But this is not true. Israeli women have not served in combat roles since Israel's War of Independence in 1948, and even then, most say they served because of desperate need. Today, unmarried Israeli women are drafted and serve short tours in the Israel Defense Forces, but they are restricted to clerical and non-combat medical fields. They are excluded from any duty involving imminent danger. In reality, American women have far greater military opportunities than do Israeli women.<sup>29</sup>

Canada, the only modern nation with women in its infantry ranks, began its gender-assimilation program in 1989 and met mostly with failure. It eventually succeeded on a small scale, learning hard lessons along the way. These lessons are the key to successful gender integration in other armies.

First, Canada's volunteer women went through regular segregated basic training, performing no more than minimum women's standards before integrated infantry training. Women's physical fitness standards in Canada are lower than men's, so the women arrived at infantry school already behind the men in overall fitness.

Once in the integrated infantry school, the women were piecemealed among the training platoons. The average composition of a platoon contained only two or three women to 30 to 40 men. This led the women to feel little or no peer support.

Finally, the Canadian forces selected too many women who could not meet the physical standards needed to perform an infantryman's job. This was probably because of a lack of volunteers. Some Canadian women dropped out of the program early, feeling that videos of infantry training and recruiters' descriptions misled them.<sup>30</sup>

Also, sexual harassment in Canada's infantry was a problem that was not addressed. The first woman to become an officer in Canada's infantry was a young woman named Sandra Perron. For years, coworkers subjected Perron to what she termed "constant emotional and psychological harassment."<sup>31</sup> Perron did not complain; instead, she quit the army in 1995. Several years later she spoke out about the abuse. She recounted one incident of being tied to a tree, beaten, and left in the snow without boots for 4 hours. An investigation revealed that peers who were competing with her for promotions resented Perron.<sup>32</sup>

Canada reacted to the Perron incident by instituting policies and training designed to eliminate sexual harassment. Current women infantry soldiers in Canada credit Perron for breaking down barriers and forcing the army to rethink its position on sexual harassment. Still others feel Perron handled the situation incorrectly. Another woman infantry officer, Maureen Wellwood, told a reporter, "The key is to talk about it. Sandra Perron should not have kept quiet. . . . She was very strong, but she accepted it at the beginning, and it kept going."<sup>33</sup> Wellwood said that there are still many men who oppose women in the infantry. "And there still will be years from now. But now the people who harass get into trouble, and not the other way around."<sup>34</sup>

Of interest is the still minuscule total number of women serving in Canada's infantry: six. In an armed force of 65,000, that number achieves the critical mass of 20 percent in only one echelon: a single platoon. It appears that Canada's infantry women will be isolated for some time. Even so, the Canadian Government has taken notice and is learning. In a 1999 article on recruiting women into its armed forces, the Canadian Department of National Defence was quoted as "hoping 25 percent of all new enlistees will be women."<sup>35</sup>

The U.S. Army can benefit from Canada's experience. In fact, integrating women into its infantry need not be difficult or painful as long as it is approached with common sense and a common purpose. That common purpose should be success. It should not integrate women into traditionally all-male units unless it is serious about creating an environment for their success. It can accomplish this by synthesizing the arguments and lessons learned.

## The Plan

Adopt higher APFT standards for women. Use the current 1999 standards for men as a starting point, and set the women's minimum standard for the run at 90 percent of the men's—17:40 rather than 18:54. Make the pushup standard for women 70 percent of the men's standard—29 rather than 19. Situp standards should remain equal. These standards are overall improvements that the Army needs to increase women's physical condition. This will

give the Army a more physically fit force and dispel the notion that women soldiers have a lower, easier standard than men.

Infantry one-station unit training (OSUT) for enlisted women should be preceded by a women-only physical fitness trainup of from 4 to 8 weeks. This would close the physical readiness gap between men and women before integrated training starts. Women would be indoctrinated into the infantry physical workload by training against men's APFT standards

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with weight training and rucksack marching. Only those women who meet the minimum standards of the men's APFT would graduate. From there, graduates would be integrated into infantry OSUT at Fort Benning, Georgia, along with the men trainees. Many women could start OSUT in better physical shape than the male trainees. This should improve initial unit cohesion by inspiring competition and respect among the untrained men and the physically ready women.

No fewer than eight women trainees, or a sufficient number to reach 20 percent of the whole, would be assigned to any training platoon—approximately 40 soldiers—at OSUT. This is consistent with social scientists' critical mass observation on the number of minorities in a majority group that are necessary to ensure adequate peer support for the minority and acceptance by the majority.

Women in OSUT would receive the same haircuts as the men, would not be allowed to wear makeup, and would compete against the same physical standards as the men. This uses lessons learned from successful gender integration at the Virginia Military Institute (VMI) in the mid-1990s. VMI benefited from the hard lessons The Citadel learned after its much-publicized forced integration of Shannon Faulkner in 1995. VMI treated the women like the men but monitored harassment. VMI leaders discovered that the men immediately accepted women who succeeded under those conditions.<sup>36</sup>

Cadre at OSUT would include women drill sergeants and officers who had successfully completed infantry OSUT or the officer equivalent. Each training company with women basic trainees would have at least one woman drill sergeant and one officer. The initial low numbers of women in OSUT could

result in concentrating all women trainees into one training company. That would not be counterproductive. In fact, it might foster peer support and the majority's peer approval.

Women in OSUT would train to achieve the men's standards throughout training but would meet the women's standards in their age groups to pass the final APFT. Women would meet all other standards required of men, including the 5-mile run in 45 minutes and all road marches carrying the same equipment as the men.<sup>37</sup>

Upon graduation, women infantry soldiers would be grouped into cohorts and assigned to the same field unit. The 20-percent guideline would be strictly adhered to. If a battalion received a cohort of six women, all would be assigned to one company and one platoon. This 20 percent guideline would be an integration tool rather than a permanent procedure. Once women were successfully integrated into the infantry, they would be individually assigned and re-assigned just as other soldiers are.

Women infantry officer trainees would precede women enlisted infantry trainees. Women at the U.S. Military Academy; in the Reserve Officer Training Course; and in Officer Candidate School would be allowed to enter the infantry branch. Upon commissioning, women officers would attend the Infantry Officer Basic Course (IOBC) at Fort Benning. They would continue to be assigned using the 20-percent guideline. Women IOBC graduates would then go

to Ranger School, using the principles described. For all female infantry officer training, women cadre members would be essential, especially at Ranger School. Successfully integrating women officers into infantry units would establish a path for young women to follow and ensure commissioned officer support.

Finally, each unit containing women infantry soldiers would designate a field grade officer within that unit to issue integration instruction and to oversee gender integration. The field grade officer would also coach, teach, and mentor women infantry soldiers and their leaders throughout the process. Company commanders would be directly responsible for their women infantry soldiers' training and welfare.

If integrating women into the infantry proceeded as outlined, not only would women succeed, but sexual harassment in the Army would decline. The greater respect women earn for themselves as true equals with military men will foster this.

The infantry will most likely struggle at first, but once women reach critical mass in units and in the overall infantry, unit cohesion and combat readiness should improve in ways we now probably cannot imagine. Change is part and parcel of the U.S. Army. Just as racial integration in the Armed Forces was considered dangerous 50 years ago, integrating females into ground combat units seems crazy today. For sure, the debate will continue, and opponents will continue to fight it. However, they are running out of solid arguments as well as time. **MR**

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